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SUBJECT: NIGERIAN ARMY PREVENTS KADUNA FROM BEING A
GREATER TRAGEDY

USDAO Abuja 3201

1. Summary: Nigeria's Army bears an international reputation for poor professional standards and for committing human rights violations. In Nigeria, that reputation is more nuanced, less negative. Of course, Nigerians know too well that soldiers often commit abuses. But they equally realize their Army is, in the last resort, the best surety of social order as well as the first choice for safe haven during bouts of communal violence. The recent communal violence in Kaduna, where the Army restored order, gave refuge to thousands, and perhaps saved hundreds of lives in the process, showed the other face of the Nigerian Army. End Summary.

2. "Muslims and Christians armed with daggers and machetes rioted in two Nigerian cities Friday, burning cars and attacking bystanders in a third day of violence over the Miss World pageant. About 100 people have been killed and 500 injured, Red Cross officials said Friday. ...

'The soldiers have been very helpful, giving us bandages and first aid. Everyone is here -- Muslims, Christians and pagan. We are all afraid of going home,' said Habiba Ibrahim, who spent the night in the city's defense academy near the government clinic where she works. ..."

(International Herald Tribune, 23-24 November, page one)

3. The November 25 edition of "Vanguard" reports 250 dead and 6,006 families displaced. If each displaced family has six members, approximately 36,000 persons fled their homes during last week's violence. Unconfirmed reports claim the death toll may exceed 500; one eyewitness reported the burial of 420 Christians. Kaduna suffered two episodes of deadly communal violence in early 2000 (February and May), with a combined death toll estimated in the low thousands. Then as now, thousands of families took refuge in military facilities. The Embassy cannot independently assess the accuracy of any estimate of the victims of this latest round of communal unrest to rock ethnically and religiously diverse Kaduna.

5. Of one thing we are certain. But for the presence of the Nigerian Army, the numbers -- whatever they may be -- would have been higher. Worried about his family's safety, an employee of one Mission member traveled to Kaduna on 22 November. He found his home vandalized, each cushion in it slashed -- but his family safe in a nearby Army barracks. They had fled moments before the attackers arrived.

6. Monday's "Vanguard" shows the breakdown of displaced families by location. 77 percent of them (4630 of 6006) are sheltering at military and police installations. Relatively few even sought refuge in other public facilities.

7. Nigerian base/facility commanders have a long tradition of opening their gates to those fleeing communal violence, regardless of religion or ethnic group. Those who would inflict violence on their fellow citizens have a history of not attempting to pursue their would-be victims onto the military bases, even though most bases lack robust perimeter security.

8. Mobs have less respect for police stations, and reports of them being overrun during riots are common. The police are not as well armed, nor are they as respected or feared, as the Army. During unrest in Abuja November 22, several police vehicles were burned, and eyewitnesses reported seeing one mob beat up a lone policeman and another mob disarm a policeman who either held his fire in the face of machetes and rocks or had not been issued bullets.

9. While a considerable number of families took refuge at police facilities in Kaduna (1357 versus 3273 on military bases), the high concentration of large police facilities in that city is unusual. In many parts of the country, the only place where the persecuted can feel safe is a military base.

10. It is impossible to estimate the additional numbers of people who would have died in Kaduna last week if base commanders had not given refuge, nor for that matter can we begin to imagine the number of lives this practice has saved over the years. It is safe to say, however, that both numbers would be substantial.

11. Meanwhile, in several parts of the country, notably in and around Jos, Plateau's capital city, most citizens want the permanent joint task forces (Police/Military) to remain in place for the foreseeable future. Whatever the human rights lapses of GON security forces, the public has more fear of armed robbers and violent, unruly mobs.

12. Comment: The events of last week prove that Nigeria is often a harsh place. Politics, ethnicity and religion are tightly intertwined and frustration born of poverty is ever present. An otherwise insignificant incident can spiral into a violent expression of inter-ethnic rancor. In too many areas of the country, eruption of communal violence is just an affront, a shove or minor traffic accident away. There have been times when the misconduct of soldiers has contributed to the tension and unnecessary violence. Frequently, however, it is the Army that restores order and provides shelter to people who would have been further victimized. Because of the Army's generally positive reputation in moments of communal violence, many people willingly ran to the safety of the various military facilities around Kaduna. The USG is starting programs to build the capacity and professional caliber of Nigeria's Police. For the foreseeable future, however, the Army alone will be able to restore order when it breaks down massively.

ANDREWS